

Dependency, Conflict, and Gender: The Use of Communication Technologies in  
Romantic Relationships of College Students

Laura Marie Smith

Submitted under the supervision of Dr. Mark Pedelty to the University Honors Program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, *summa cum laude* in Communication Studies.

May 6, 2014

### Acknowledgements

This honors thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and encouragement I received from my advisers, Dr. Mark Pedelty, Dr. Ascan Koerner, Dr. Shayla Thiel-Stern, and Brian Koeneman. During times of confusion and stress, they helped me stay positive and calm. Thank you all for believing in my abilities from the start and for sticking with me to the finish.

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how romantic, heterosexual relationships of college students are being affected by the use of communication technologies such as texting, social media, and phone calls. A mixed method approach was used combining a survey and interviews. The survey sampled about 70 undergraduates in heterosexual, romantic relationships and asked questions about their technology-use and its impact on their relationships. Four couples were interviewed separately using the same questions. Specifically, this study asked if students feel that the success of their relationships is dependent on the use of communication technologies, if technology is related to conflict in their relationships, and if there are any significant differences each sex's perceptions of the technologies. Both the survey and interviews indicated that the success of relationships is dependent on the use of technology and that there is a strong relationship between conflict in romantic relationships and the use of communication technologies. Also, males and females do not perceive the effects of technology on their relationships differently. Ideally, this study will aid in the advancement of future media effects research, assist social scientists and therapists in properly assessing romantic couples, and lead to the creation of new technology that can more effectively serve the needs of modern romantic couples.

*Keywords:* romantic couples, communication technology, college students, texting

Table of Contents

Introduction..... 6

Research Method ..... 7

Results: Dependency..... 18

Results: Conflict..... 16

Results: Differences between Genders ..... 20

Discussion ..... 31

Conclusion ..... 34

References..... 26

## Table of Figures

Figure 1: Technologies Use by Partners in Romantic Relationships.....	11
Figure 2: How Frequently Students Use Specific Communication Technologies .....	12
Figure 3: Partners' Predictions of How Removing Technologies Indefinitely would affect their Relationships.....	13
Figure 4: Technologies Used to Address Conflict.....	18
Figure 5: Participants Answering that Relationship Conflict has Arisen out of the USE of Technology .....	19
Figure 6: Participants Answering that Relationship Conflict has Arisen out of the LACK OF USE of Technology.....	20
Figure 7: Satisfaction with Frequency of Calling by Sex .....	26
Figure 8: Satisfaction with Frequency of Texting by Sex .....	26
Figure 9: Satisfaction with Frequency of Facebook Messages/Wall Posts by Sex .....	26
Figure 10: Prediction of Effect on Relationship if Calling were Removed .....	27
Figure 11: Prediction of Effect on Relationship if Texting were Removed .....	28
Figure 12: Prediction of Effect on Relationship if Facebook Messages and/or Wall Posts were Removed .....	28

### The Use of Communication Technologies in Romantic Relationships of College Students

Most of today's college students, ages 18-22, were born between the years 1991 and 1996. In these years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and mobile phone use were in their early stages of use. Computer-mediated communication is, "...an umbrella term which refers to human communication via computers," and became popular as a social communication tool via services like AOL Instant Messaging and MySpace in the mid-90s (Simpson, 2002). Mobile phones were first introduced on German military trains in 1918, but their widespread consumer use did not begin until the late 1980s (Campbell, 2013). Jessica Connell, a Communication Studies Master's candidate at the University of Minnesota defines communication technology as, "...any communication device or application, including cell phones, computers and computer software, the Internet, as well as the services and applications that these devices possess, and allows for almost instant and potentially constant communication across long distances at relatively low costs" (as cited in Green, 2002, p. 281-292).

Today's college students were among the first generation to learn social skills while surrounded by this technology. These students have never known a world without the ability to be in constant contact with others through different forms of technology. Their perception of interpersonal communication is significantly different than those of their parents and grandparents; their close relationships are infiltrated with these technologies unlike any generation before. This is why it is important to study how technology affects this generation's ability to develop and carry out relationships.

Much research has covered communication technology's pervasiveness in parent-child communication, workplace communication, and romantic communication. However, this previous research has remained surface-level and quantitative, and has not begun to delve into

the practical implications of communication technologies on interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, the aforementioned group of college students, the Gen Y-ers who may not know how to develop relationships without technology, have not been intensely studied in their relationship-management and communication habits. The aim of this research is to provide an accurate depiction of how college students use communication technologies in their romantic, heterosexual relationships. Specifically, it is questioned whether or not students depend on communication technologies to maintain successful romantic relationships, if these technologies affect the conflict within these relationships, and if students' perceptions of the effects of technology on their relationships are correlated to their sex.

### **Research Method**

In order to obtain in-depth detail about romantic partners' use of communication technologies in their relationships, a mixed methods approach was employed. Specifically, qualitative interviews were coupled with a mirrored quantitative survey. This means that the questions of the interviews, created first, were almost identical to the electronic survey in order to compare responses between each method. The qualitative interviews were intended to provide the bulk of information to be analyzed. The survey was meant to provide a larger snapshot of the population of which these couples are a part. The following is a description of each of these methods.

#### **Electronic Survey Method**

Responses to the electronic survey were collected prior to beginning the interviews in order to garner an understanding of the student population as a whole. The survey questions were slightly altered from the interview questions in order to be offered electronically.

**Participants**

The sample of survey participants consisted of (N~70) college students who were in romantic, heterosexual relationships. The choice to study only heterosexual couples was made in order to proactively study this type of relationship and to not conflate heterosexual and homosexual relationships; these types of relationships might utilize technology differently and it may be related to gender. The total number of participants varied by question because some students did not answer all questions. Most questions were answered by about 70 individuals, but participation for all questions ranged from 59-71 people. The only additional demographic information collected about participants, besides that which was included in the participation requirements listed below, was their sex. It should be noted that survey participants were of a more diverse background than interview participants due to the larger sample size and method of recruitment.

**Procedure**

The survey was offered to two undergraduate Communication Studies classes at the University of Minnesota as well as to additional peers of the principal investigator via Facebook and word-of-mouth. This method of recruitment was chosen out of convenience based on the participant requirements. The investigator informed potential participants of the participation requirements prior to allowing them to take the survey. The requirements are listed below:

- College student
- Between the ages of 18 and 22
- Member of a romantic, heterosexual relationship
- Relationship began at least three months prior to being surveyed/interviewed
- Currently residing within 30 miles of partner (not “long-distance”)



If the students did not meet the requirements, they were not permitted to participate in the survey. Students in the two Communication Studies classes who participated were offered extra credit. All participants were emailed a link to the survey once they confirmed with the principal investigator that they met the requirements. They were also asked to forward the link to their romantic partners in order to have the partner complete the survey.

### **Survey Development**

The electronic survey was created using the University of Minnesota's survey tool, Qualtrics. The tool allowed the investigator to control access to the survey by requiring participants to receive a link via email in order to participate. The final draft of the survey questions was edited by the investigator's research adviser and then approved by the adviser and the Institutional Review Board on October 28th, 2013 (IRB #1310P44723).

### **Measures**

The electronic survey consisted of eleven questions regarding the individual's use of communication technology in his/her romantic relationship. The first question was the only one that asked for demographic information, sex. The remaining questions varied in format (i.e. Likert scale, Yes/No, "Select All That Apply") to obtain detailed information regarding how the individual used communication technologies in his or her relationship. More detail on the content of these questions is described with the analysis of results.

### **Interview Method**

The principal investigator solicited romantic couples who met the same requirements as the survey to participate in individual interviews. These couples were contacted in-person, via Facebook message, and by email. Each member of each couple participated in an interview where they were asked essentially the same questions as the survey, but with slightly different

phrasing for the interview setting. The investigator also asked probing questions when necessary to gain more detail from the participants. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed to ensure accuracy in content and quotations from participants. Pseudonyms for each pair of partners were assigned to maintain confidentiality throughout this report and are as follows: Megan and Carter, Jack and Stephanie, Georgia and Sean, and Katherine and David. These names were chosen to reflect similar cultural backgrounds to those of the actual participants.

### **Results: Dependency**

Dependency is one of the themes that drove this study. Specifically, this study aimed at describing if and to what extent college students in romantic relationships depend on communication technologies to maintain their relationships. The results of both the survey and interviews suggest that students in these types of relationships do depend on communication technologies to maintain normalcy and happiness in their relationships. The interviews were the only place where participants explicitly stated that they were *not* dependent on technology. However, in viewing interviews and survey results as a whole, it is apparent that romantic student couples depend on technology to maintain their relationships, though at varying degrees and for different reasons.

#### **Survey Results on Dependency**

In first examining survey results, the data collected overwhelmingly supports the idea that students feel that the success of their relationships depends on the use of communication technologies. It is first necessary to understand the extent to which these couples use each technology. As previously stated, about 70 males and females in heterosexual, romantic relationships completed the survey. Keep in mind that the total numbers of responses for each

question varied slightly from the total of 70; all following percentages are taken from the number of responses to each question. As seen in Figure 1, when asked which technologies they use to communicate in their relationships, 96% of students said they call, 97% said they text, and 82% said they use Facebook. Each subsequent technology, including email, blogging, tweeting, among others, resulted in 51% or less of the total number of participants using them. May it be noted that texting as it is known today began in 1992 and Facebook was founded in 2004 (Crystal, 2008; Campbell, 2013). It is interesting that these technologies have become essential to relationships in such a short period of time.

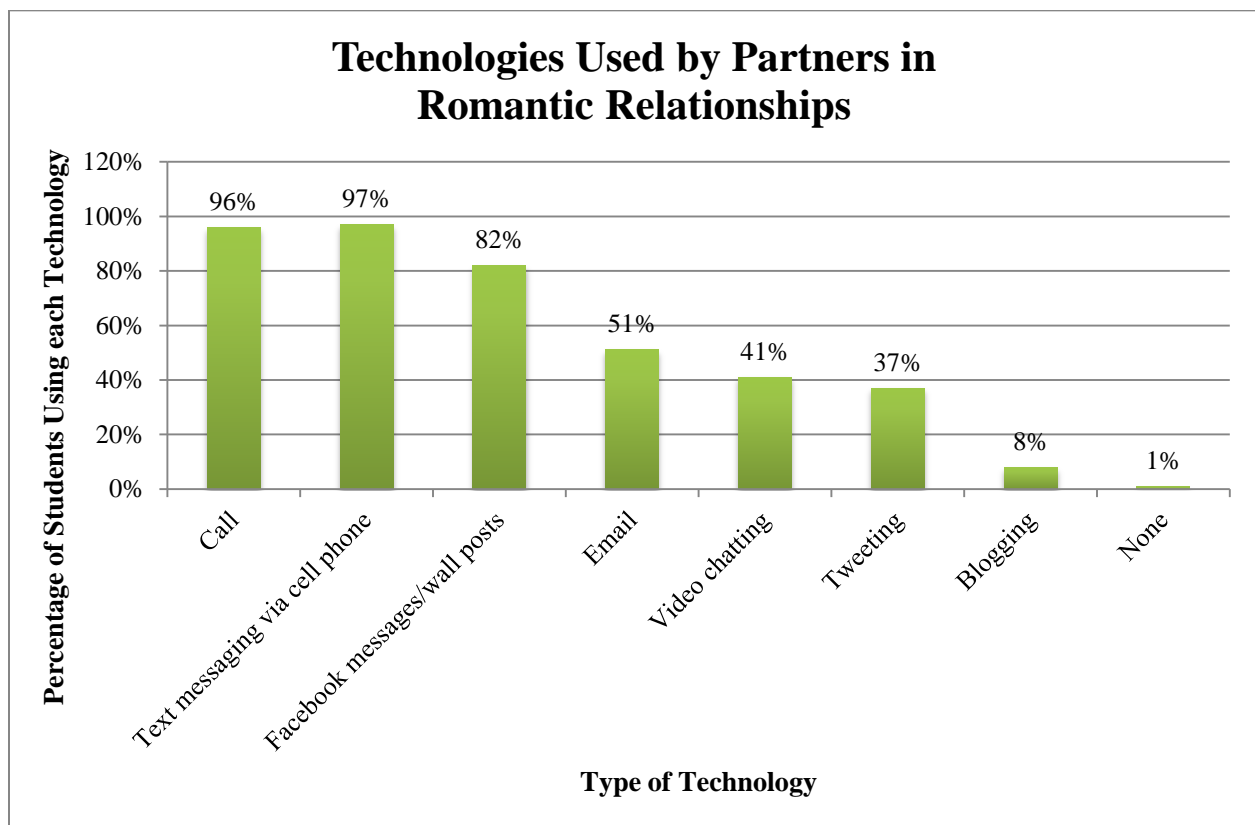
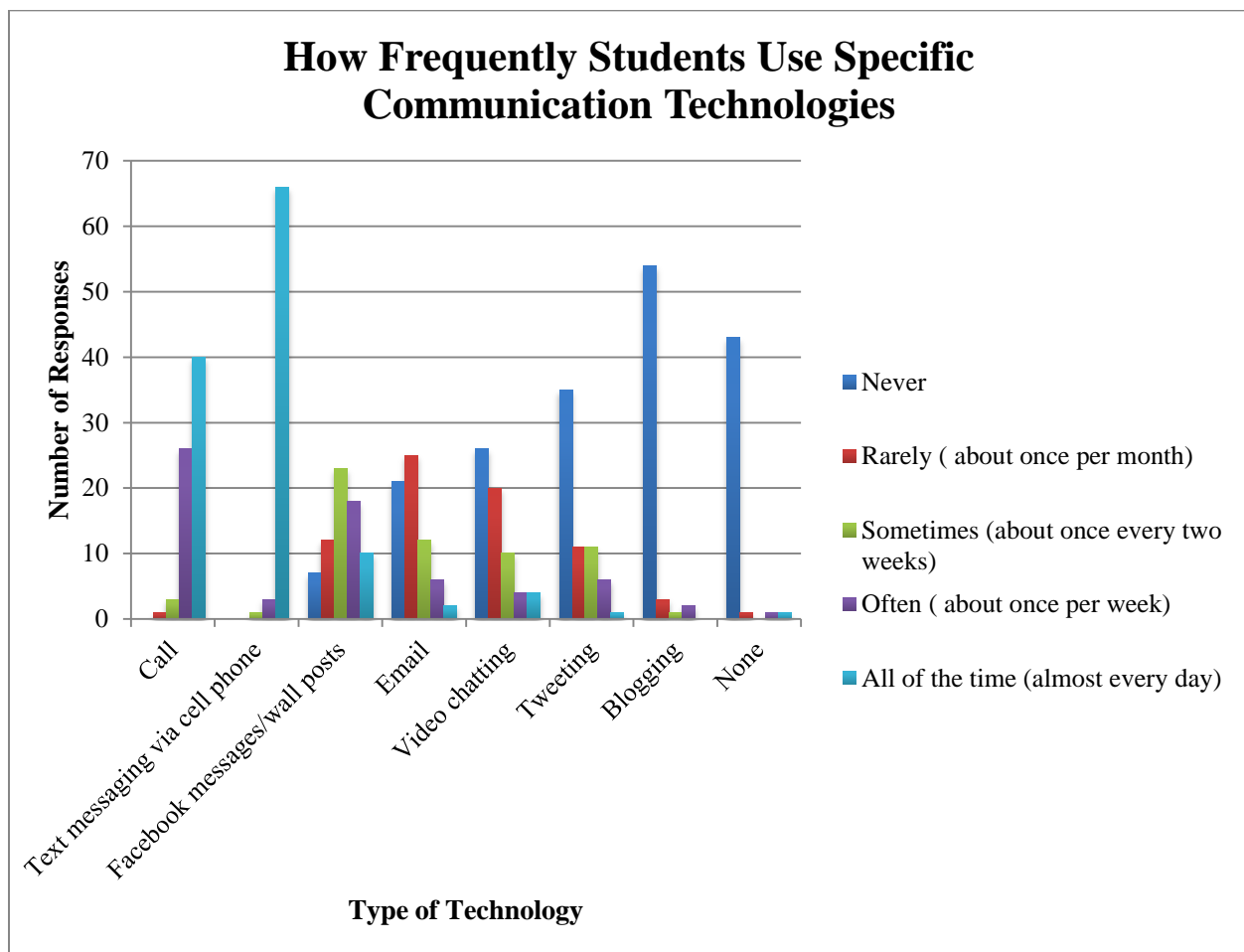


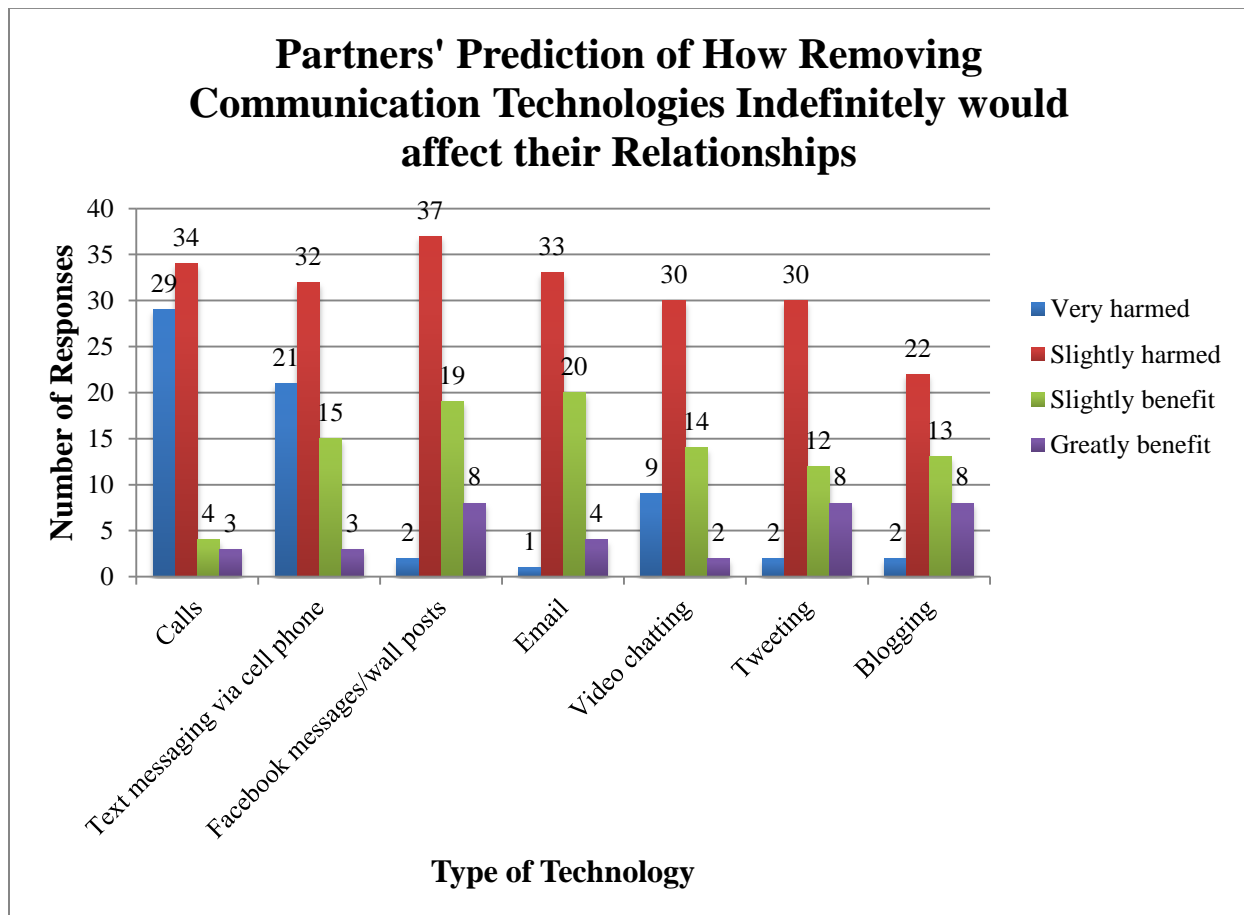
Figure 1: Technologies Used by Partners in Romantic Relationships

To address the question of dependency, the survey included two questions asking students about the frequency with which they use technologies and the potential harm if they no longer had them to communicate with their partners. First, students were asked how often they use specific technologies to communicate in their relationships. As shown in Figure 2, 94% of students call often or all of the time and 94% text all of the time. The sheer frequency of use shows that these technologies play a large role in the maintenance of these students' relationships, and can be seen as necessary tools upon which these couples depend to foster happy, successful relationships.



**Figure 2: How Frequently Students Use Specific Communication Technologies**

Second, students were asked how they believe their relationships would be affected if each technology were taken away. As seen in Figure 3, 90% of the 70 participants who answered this question responded that their relationship would be very or slightly harmed if they could no longer call each other. Also, 74% of students who responded claimed that their relationship would be very or slightly harmed if they could no longer text their partners. In combining responses to this question over all technologies, it is clear that most of the participants believed that their relationships would be harmed in some way if technology were removed from their relationships. These statistics reveal that college students in romantic, heterosexual relationships believe that maintaining happy, successful relationships depends on the use of communication technologies.



**Figure 3: Partners' Predictions of How Removing Technologies Indefinitely would affect their Relationships**

**Interview Results on Dependency**

Next, each participant interviewed explicitly expressed that he or she did *not* feel that the success of his or her relationship depended on the use of communication technologies. However, in analyzing each interview in its entirety, it is clear that each couple used technology frequently to address issues critical to relationship success. Thus, it is impossible to deny that the communication technologies play a key role in the maintenance and development of their relationships. In other words, interview responses suggest that the need for communication technologies in these couples' relationships is so pervasive that they seem to take them for granted when asked about them outright.

Each participant interviewed described two distinct patterns using communication technologies in his/her relationship. The first pattern was that each couple needed technology to initiate the relationship. For example, Stephanie explained that when her relationship with Jack was just beginning in high school, they expressed the majority of their feelings toward one another through texting every day. Stephanie stated, "I would say that we wouldn't be at the phase that we are now...without having it or being dependent on it before." She later admitted that their relationship could not have begun or lasted this long without the use of communication technology in the early stages. The boyfriend of another couple, Carter, described his experience using technology to initiate his relationship with Megan: "Facebook was more important in the very initial stages of our relationship. As soon as I got her phone number, we didn't use Facebook anymore." Carter went on to say, "Right away when everything is exciting and new and you want to make sure it doesn't fall apart, texting is a huge priority. But now, it's not. It's probably something I should make a higher priority." Carter made it clear that he needed to use technology frequently to initiate his romantic relationship with Megan.

Carter's experience is very common for people of his generation. Kelly Hultgren, an undergraduate honors student at the University of Arizona, described in her research that, "Nowadays, it's common for two people to, 'get to know each other,' through text messaging and social networking, before actually meeting or talking in-person" (Hultgren, 2013). It is clear that the couples interviewed at the University of Minnesota are not alone in their dependency on communication technology, such as Facebook and texting, to initiate romantic relationships.

The second pattern of use recognized by all four couples interviewed was that they use technology daily to feel connected and make plans, both of which are necessary to maintain a romantic relationship. Every couple claimed to text every day throughout the day, as well as call each other at least once per day. Megan described this constant texting as, "...your everyday, small talk conversation, staying in touch with one another. And then Facebook is little things you think [the significant other] would appreciate."

Similarly, Licoppe (2004) found that today's couples prefer a "connected mode" of communication which is, "...represented by short and frequent calls and text-messages that reaffirm the feelings of connectedness between communicators" (Licoppe, 2004). In another study by researchers at Pennsylvania State University, a married man expressed his positive feelings toward texting his wife daily in saying, "I really like the connectivity of it. It's the ability to touch base with her any time I want" (Pettigrew, 2009). Staying connected through constant communication is an important aspect of maintaining a romantic relationship.

Katherine and Sean, members of different couples, also showcased this point in saying, respectively, "I feel like constant communication strengthens our relationship because we can keep updated on each other," and, "We're both working a lot, so I think communication technology is definitely important in keeping us close as a couple." Overall, the necessity for

frequent contact in the initiation stages of these students' romantic relationships, as well as throughout each day, shows that these college students do need and depend on communication technologies to maintain successful relationships.

These couples also described using communication technologies to make plans with one another. When asked if she felt that the success of her relationship was dependent on technology, Georgia, Sean's girlfriend, explained, "I don't know if it would be unsuccessful, but technology makes planning every day a lot easier." Stephanie also asserted that:

...as college students with fluctuating schedules, I think it would be really difficult to make plans [without technology] far enough ahead of time. And not being able to adjust them, I feel like that would almost cause more conflict.

Without the ability to make plans and stay connected daily, each of these couples described how difficult their relationship would become.

Overall, despite the fact that interviewees explicitly stated that their relationships did not depend on the use of communication technologies, when asked about it in more detail, it was clear that they had simply taken for granted how important these devices were in their daily lives. Both interview responses combined with survey data suggest that college students in romantic, heterosexual relationships believe that the success of their relationships depends on the use of communication technologies.

### **Results: Conflict**

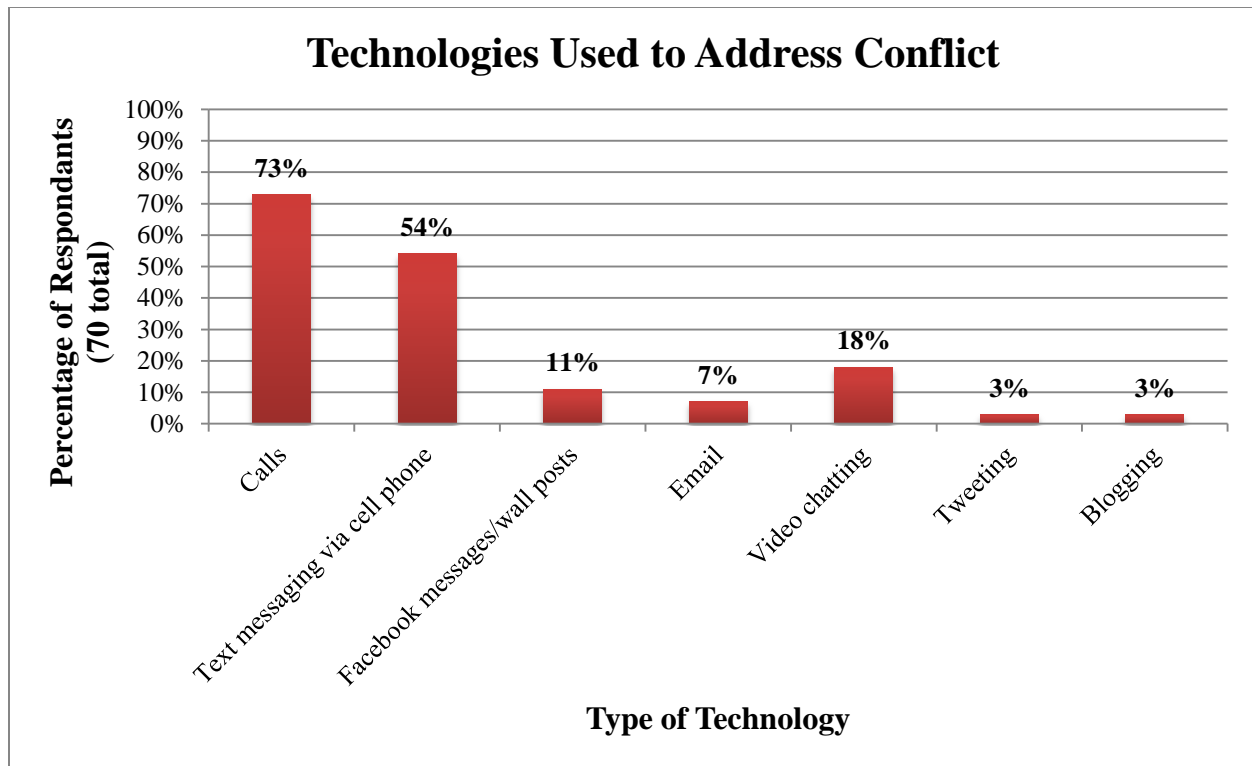
In addition to dependency, this study also focused on conflict involving technology in relationships. In this study, two types of conflict were of focus: conflict about the relationship and conflict about technology. In other words, couples in both the survey and interviews answered that they use technology to address sources of couple conflict and that conflict within



their relationship arises from the use or lack of use of communication technologies themselves. Following is a depiction of how survey and interview participants described both of these types of conflict. Survey and interview results both reveal that communication technologies play a significant role in relationship conflict.

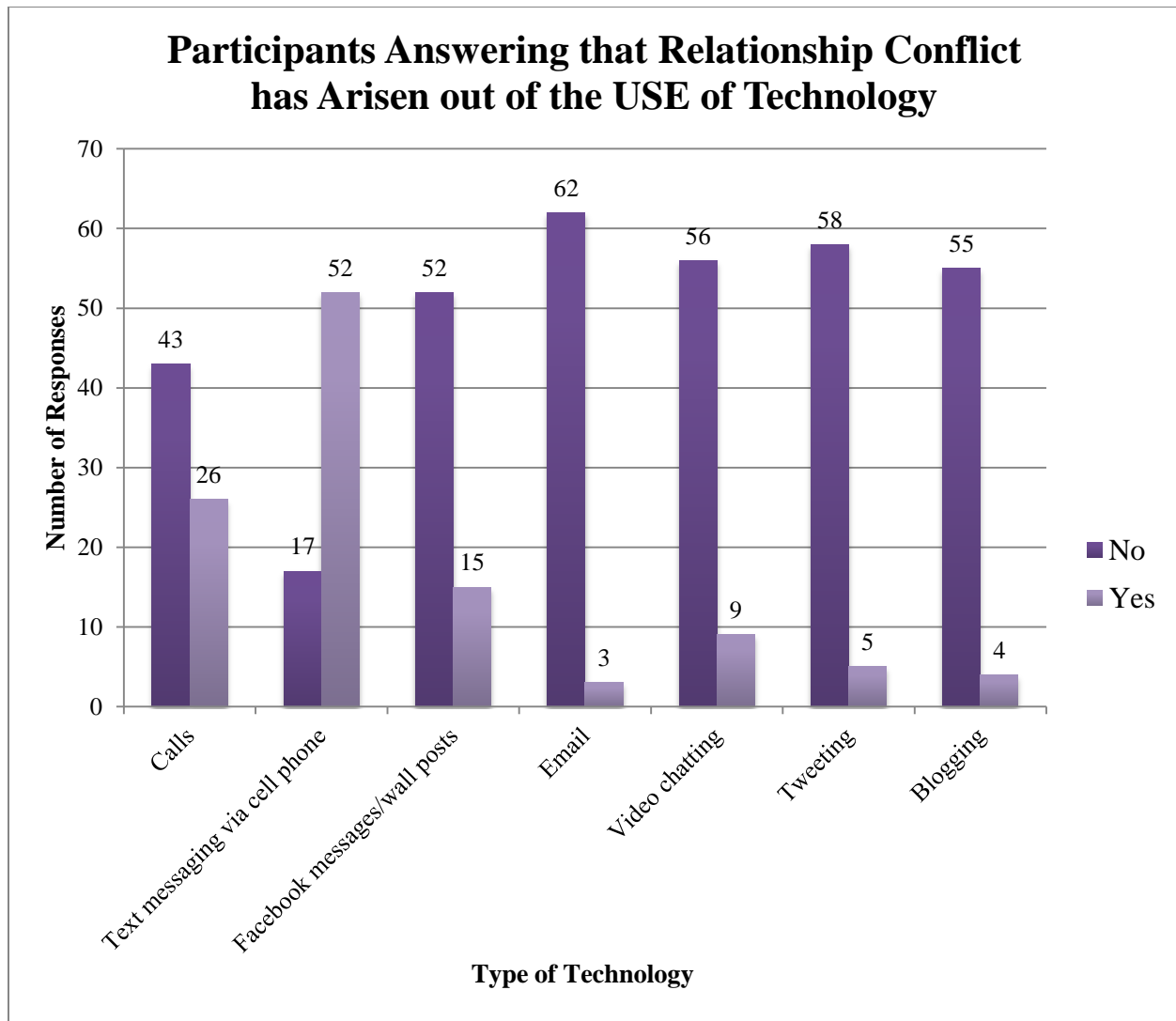
### **Survey Results on Conflict**

Survey results support the idea that communication technologies play a key role in romantic relationship conflict. Students were asked two types of questions regarding conflict in the survey to address the two types of conflict described above. The first question asked about conflict within the relationship being dealt with through a technological medium. Specifically, participants were asked, “What technologies do you and your partner use to address conflict?” Keeping in mind that survey participants already responded that they use mostly texting, calling, and sometimes Facebook to communicate in their relationships (see Figure 1), students once again reported that they primarily use calling and texting to address conflict. Specifically, 73% of the 70 respondents reported using phone calls and 54% reported using texting. Note that survey participants were allowed to select more than one technology for this question, so it is likely that these individuals use several technologies to address conflict in their relationships. Interestingly, 18% of participants also reported using video chatting to address conflict. All other technologies had significantly lower usage in times of conflict. Please refer to Figure 4 to view all responses to this question. In viewing these survey results, there is no doubt that college students use technology, primarily calling, texting, and video chatting, to deal with conflict within their relationships.



**Figure 4: Technologies Used to Address Conflict**

The next pair of survey questions queried participants about conflict arising out of the use or lack of use of specific communication technologies. In this set of questions, the total number of respondents for each type of technology varied from 59-71. This is likely due to respondents not selecting an answer for a technology that he or she does not use at all or often. The percentages described below reflect the amount of responses out of the total amount of responses for *each* type of technology.

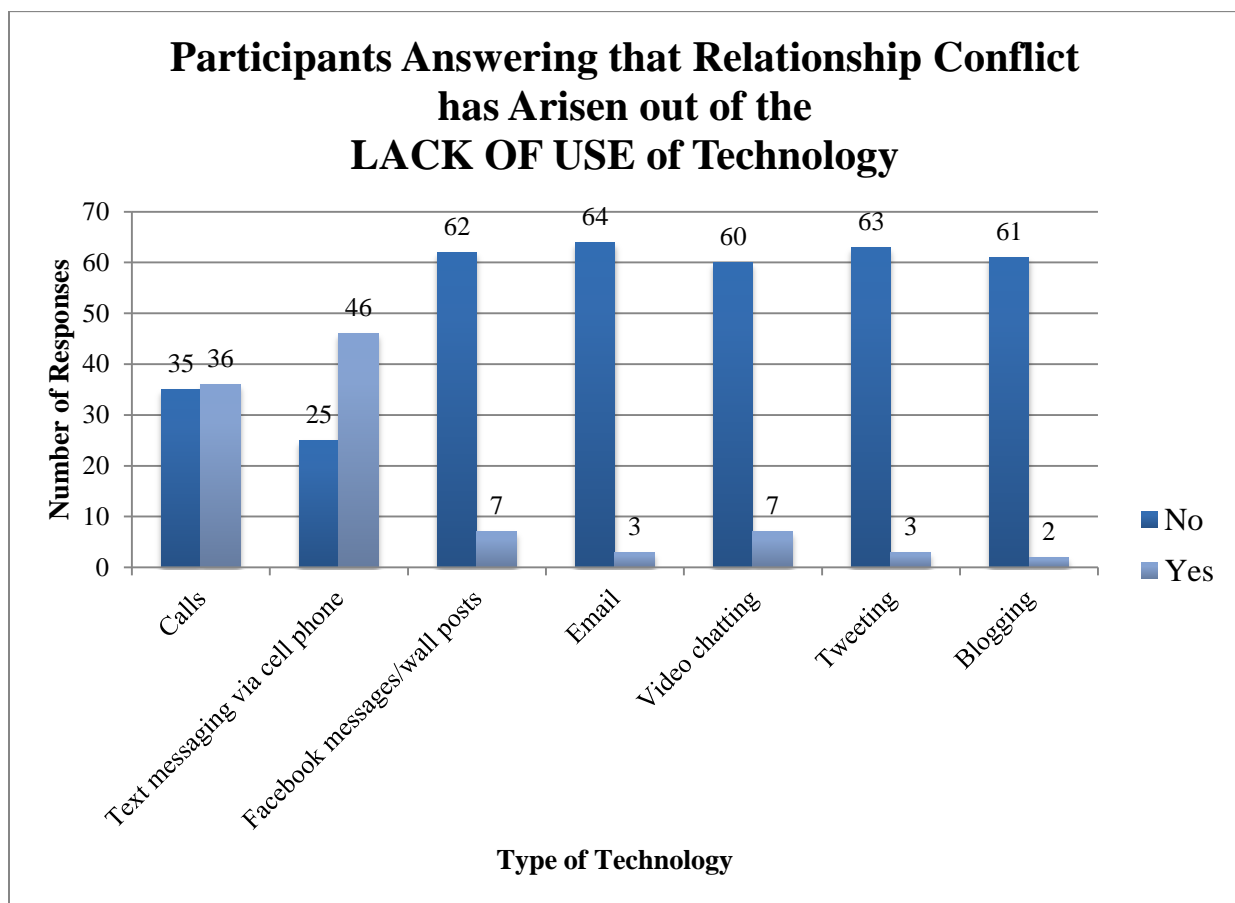


**Figure 5: Participants Answering that Relationship Conflict has Arisen out of the USE of Technology**

In this set of questions, students were first asked, “Has any conflict between you and your partner ever arisen out of the USE of these communication technologies?” As seen in Figure 5, most respondents indicated that conflict has not arisen out of the *use* of most of the technologies, except for texting and calling. 52 out of 69 students, or roughly 75%, responded that conflict has arisen in their relationship from texting. Also, 26 out of 69 respondents, or about 38%, answered that conflict has arisen out of the use of phone calls. Once again, texting and calling precipitate

large numbers of students claiming these technologies affect their relationship. Here, the effect from *using* them is conflict.

The second question in this set asked, “Has any conflict between you and your partner ever arisen out of the LACK OF USE of these communication technologies?” This question aimed to identify conflict arising from partners failing to communicate using technology when their partner expected them to do so. Responses to this question are seen in Figure 6.



**Figure 6: Participants Answering that Relationship Conflict has Arisen out of the LACK OF USE of Technology**

Here, texting and calling were popular answers, as well. 46 out of 71 respondents, or about 65%, answered that a lack of texting caused conflict. The respondents were split almost 50/50 as to

whether a lack of calling caused conflict. Although over 90% of participants claimed earlier in the survey that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the frequency of calling and texting in their relationships, it appears that using or failing to use these two technologies causes conflict. This incongruity may be a result of students answering questions quickly at the beginning of the survey and initially believing they were satisfied with their frequency of using each technology. However, when they were asked this pair of questions later regarding conflict and gave the technologies more thought, they realized that frequency of using or not using technology causes conflict, which is probably dissatisfying. In other words, survey participants were probably actually dissatisfied with the frequency in which they used these communication technologies because they sometimes cause conflict in the relationship.

Overall, responses to this pair of questions produced data to support the idea that technology has a significant effect on relationship conflict. These results reveal that texting and calling are becoming obligatory technologies. Although texting has not been around long enough to see if it will last, it is currently a necessary technology and cultural coding is still being invented on how to use it.

### **Interview Results on Conflict**

Interview participants also indicated that communication technology plays a significant role in relationship conflict. First, like the first conflict-related question posed in the survey, many participants spoke of using some sort of technological medium to address relationship conflict. One couple, Stephanie and Jack, had a particularly strong tie to technology when dealing with conflict in their relationship. Stephanie explained that she appreciated having technology in her relationship by saying, “I would say that now that we have found a balance with [technology], conflict is helped a lot and I’m glad that we have it to use to resolve some of

our issues.” She went on to say that she and Jack preferred addressing conflict through technology rather than face-to-face. Specifically, she explained that conflict in their relationship was usually brought up through a text which was then followed by a phone call. This way, they could be much more clear with their messages and still be comfortable without having the, “...pressure of the other person standing right in front of you.”

Other students interviewed expressed gratefulness for technology during times of relationship conflict, as well. Sean explained this in saying, “Texting ensures that they get the message [when dealing with conflict] and that it’s going to be *with* them.” Sean is not alone in appreciating text messages in times of conflict. A participant in Pettigrew’s (2009) study said that, “...it’s kind of like a way of getting away from arguing, like on the phone. Instead, you text message to try to get your point across” (Pettigrew, 2009). In fact, most interview participants in the present study explicitly mentioned or alluded to appreciating using some form of technology during conflict because it is more immediate, and sometimes more clear, than talking in-person. It is clear that each couple interviewed used technology in varying degrees to address conflict in their relationships.

Second, all students interviewed described different situations where the communication technologies themselves caused conflict within the relationship. Most of this conflict centered on frequency of contact using the technology. Georgia, Stephanie, and Megan all described their annoyance when their boyfriends did not text them when expected. Georgia said, “Like, if he forgets his phone one day or lets his phone die and I can’t talk to him all day or something, I get annoyed.” Megan explained, “...if I know he’s out with his friends and stuff, I would like him to text me when he gets home or something, just so I know that he’s safe...so that I know that at the end of the night he’s thinking of me.” Megan also mentioned feeling slightly jealous when she

saw that her boyfriend posted on other friends' Facebook walls more frequently than her own. Megan's feeling of jealousy is not uncommon. A study conducted in 2011 found that jealousy arising from Facebook-use was common due to the, "...constant availability of information about the partner on the SNS [Social Networking Site]..." (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). According to these responses, a partner failing to communicate via technology as frequently as the other partner expects causes tension and conflict in the relationship.

Another type of frustration expressed by two of the eight total partners was that their significant others were not paying enough attention to them in-person because they were constantly using technology to communicate with others. For example, Katherine's boyfriend, David, said, "Once in a while, I'll be like, 'Are you [Katherine] gonna sit on your phone all night?' It doesn't really bother me, but...like last night we were watching *Dexter* and I was like, 'Are you paying attention? This is important.'" To David, paying attention to the show they were watching together was an important bonding moment, and he wanted Katherine to be fully present. Unfortunately, communication technology, with its enticing accessibility, caused her to turn her attention elsewhere. In these interviews, students expressed that their relationship conflict was addressed through a technological medium, or that the medium itself caused conflict due to too little or too much use with the partner.

Across survey and interview responses, college students reported that technology plays a significant and undeniably important role in the conflict in their romantic relationships. First, students showed and explained that they use technology to deal with couple conflict. Second, responded that communication technologies themselves, primarily texting and calling, cause conflict within their relationships. Combined with the insights regarding dependency, this study

suggests that technology affects the romantic relationships of college students in both positive and negative ways.

### **Results: Differences between Genders**

This study also explored whether or not males and females hold different perceptions of communication technology in their romantic relationships. Interestingly, although recent research claims that there are notable differences between each sex's use of technology in relationships, the current study found no significant differences. The terms 'sex' and 'gender' will be used in this section in accordance with precedents set earlier in this field of research by other professors and scholars. The term 'sex' will be deployed when discussing survey and interview results from a male or female person. The term 'gender' will be used when making broader statements from a sociocultural perspective about what results could mean for people identifying with a specific gender.

### **Outside Research regarding Gender and Technology**

Two studies conducted in the past five years have shown that females and males perceive and use communication technology differently in their relationships. First, a 2012 study by Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, and Dill set out to uncover the differences between each sex's use of mediated communication. These researchers found that overall, women use and prefer to use mediated communication such as text messaging, social media, and online video calls more than men. These findings suggest a significant difference in the way that each gender perceives and chooses to use communication technology.

Second, a study conducted at a southern university in 2011 by Burke, Wallen, Vail-Smith, and Knox focused on how undergraduate members of romantic couples utilized communication technology, such as email, social networks, and text messages, to monitor and



control their partners. This study found that females were much more likely to use communication technology to monitor and control their partners than males. This suggests that females are more frequent users of these technologies and that they perceive their value within romantic relationships differently than males.

### **Survey Results: Gender**

Unlike the two studies described above, survey results from the present study did not reveal any significant differences between male and female perceptions of how communication technologies affect their relationships. For example, in examining responses to two questions regarding the participants' opinions on calling, texting, and Facebook messages and wall posts, it is clear that participants in this survey had similar thoughts regardless of their sex. These three technologies are important to focus on because they were the most often used across all survey responses.

One question asked participants how satisfied they were with their frequency of using the above technologies and to place their answers on a four-point Likert scale. Overall, 41 females and 29 males gave complete answers to this question. By considering the results in Figure 7-9, it appears that both male and female participants feel similar levels of satisfaction with how frequently they use calling, texting, and Facebook messages/wall posts. The values shown are percentages taken from the total number of respondents of each gender.

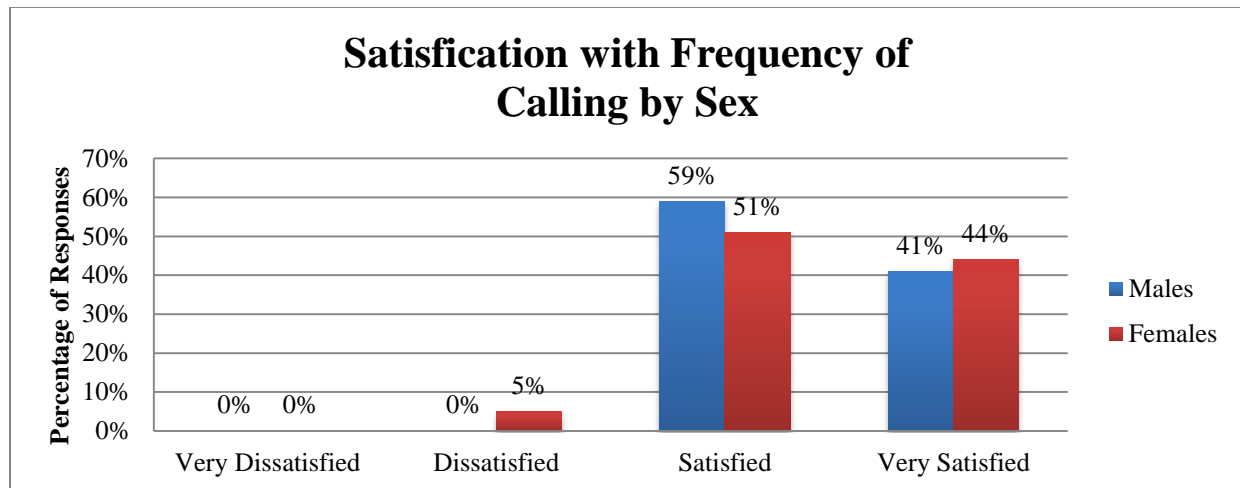


Figure 7: Satisfaction with Frequency of Calling by Sex

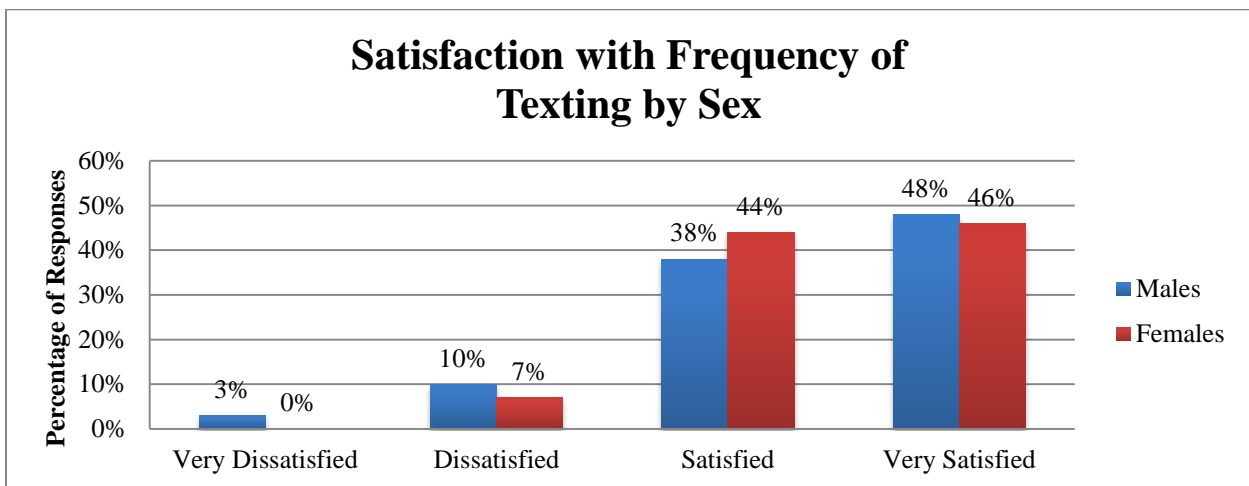


Figure 8: Satisfaction with Frequency of Texting by Sex

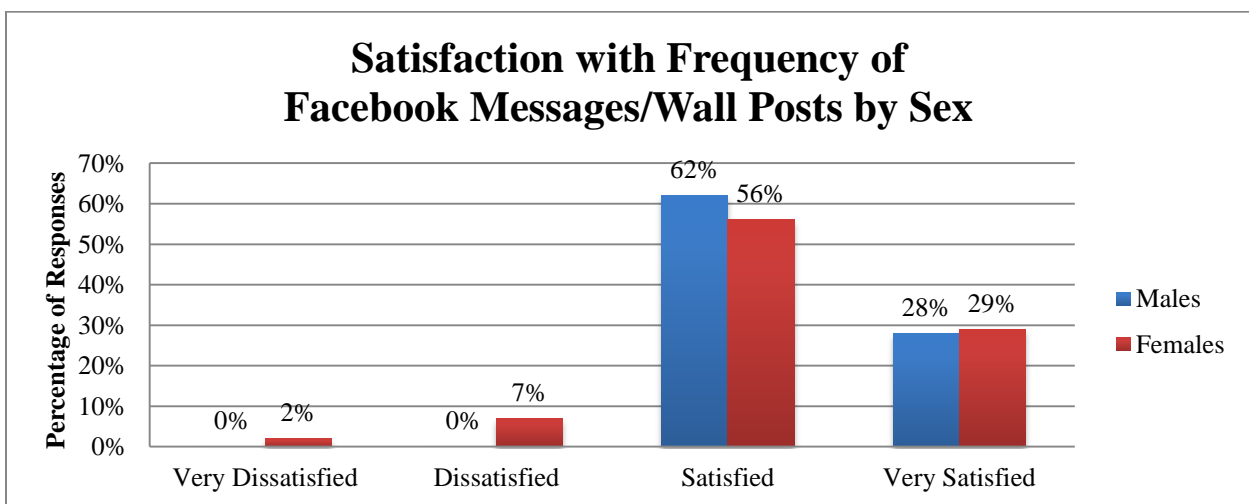
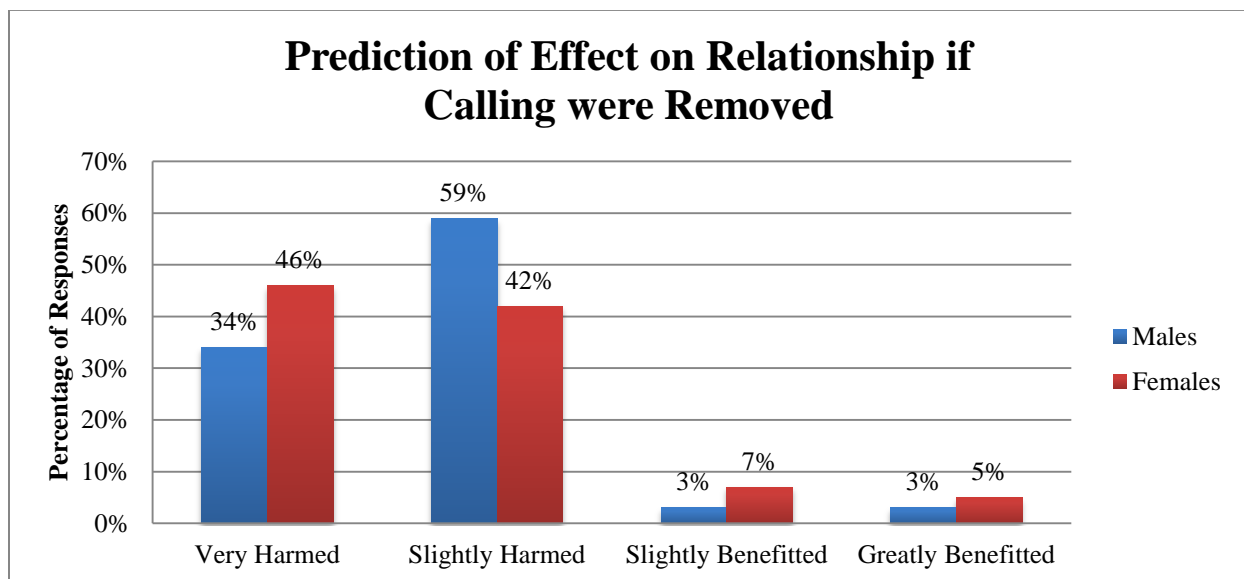


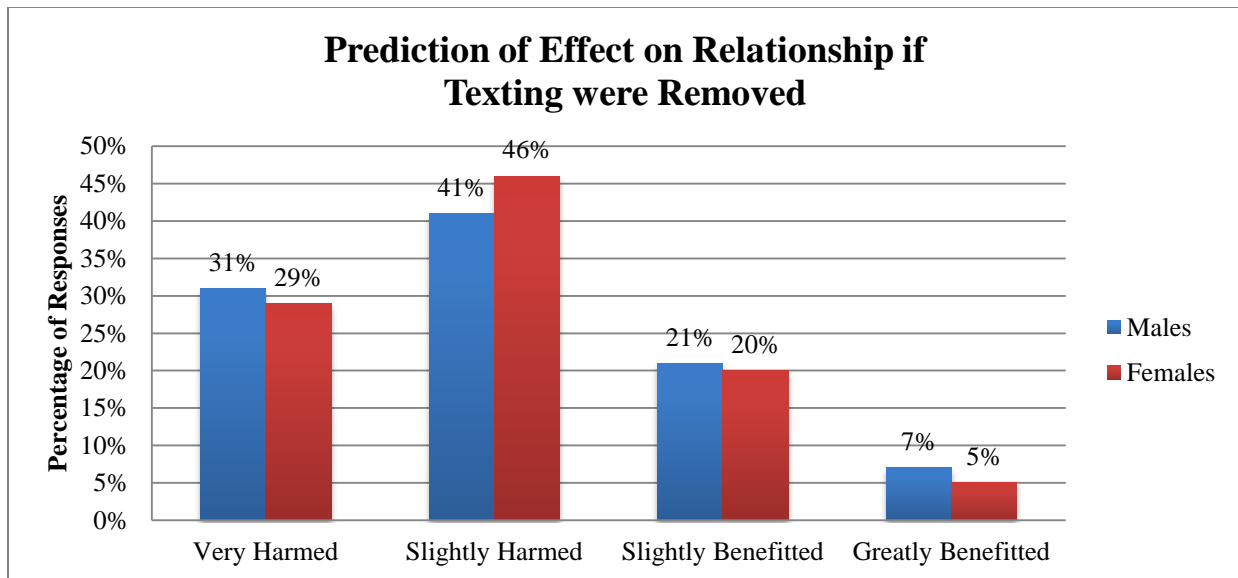
Figure 9: Satisfaction with Frequency of Facebook Messages/Wall Posts by Sex

The results from this question are interesting in that they are in direct contrast with the study by Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, and Dill (2012). Specifically, the 2012 study found that women preferred to text more frequently than men. However, the present study suggests that males and females may feel similar levels of satisfaction with the frequency with which they use text messaging; 38% of males and 44% of females reported feeling satisfied, and 48% of males and 46% of females reported feeling very satisfied. Across each of these three technologies, the differences between male and female answers are not significant enough to draw a conclusion that members of one sex feel differently about how frequently they use them than the other sex.

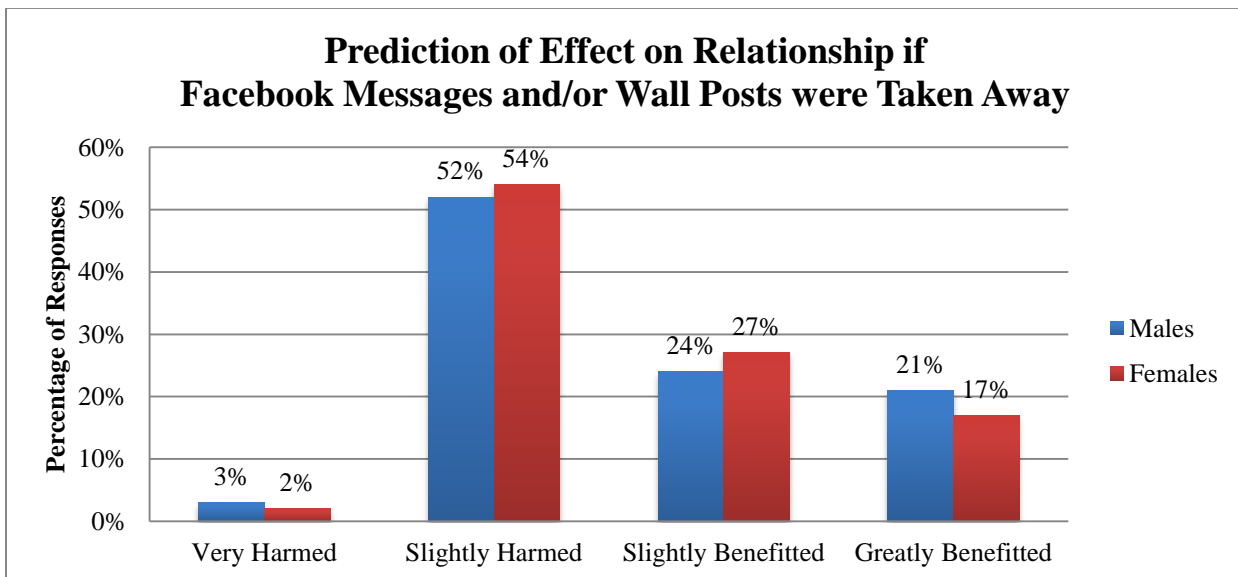
Another question asked students to predict if they think their relationship would benefit or be harmed if they were to no longer call, text, or post Facebook messages and wall posts. This is the same question referred to in Figure 3. Like the previous question, males and females responded similarly, as seen in Figure 10-12.



**Figure 10: Prediction of Effect on Relationship if Calling were Removed**



**Figure 11: Prediction of Effect on Relationship if Texting were Removed**



**Figure 12: Prediction of Effect on Relationship if Facebook Messages and/or Wall Posts were Removed**

It appears that in this study, males and females may have had slightly different opinions on how their relationships would fair if calling were taken away, but all other results for this

question were very similar between sexes<sup>1</sup>. These results are not in direct contrast with the studies described above. However, responses to this question do show that the students of different sexes in this survey do not differ as drastically in their views on the effects of technologies on their relationships as in the previous two studies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Interview Results: Gender**

Interview participants also described similar perceptions of communication technologies in their relationships, regardless of their sex. Specifically, almost every boyfriend and girlfriend in each couple gave similar responses to questions regarding their opinions about how the technologies affect their relationship.

First, when participants were asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with the frequency with which they use technology in their relationships, members of each sex in three of the four couples described that they were satisfied. Interestingly, each member of these three couples said that they felt satisfied with their frequency of communication via technology, but guessed that their partner was not. For example, when asked this question, Carter said, “I would say I’m satisfied.... But, I definitely have a habit of forgetting to check my phone, so [Megan] definitely gets annoyed by that.” However, Megan said, “I’m completely satisfied.... I think if anything, [Carter] would probably want less overall.” Here, although they believed their partner was dissatisfied, both the male and female actually felt very similar levels of satisfaction regarding how frequently they communicate via technology. This misunderstanding may be linked to Deborah Tannen’s view that men and women communicate differently and may read gendered codes as dissatisfaction, confusion, etc. (Tannen, 1994, as cited in Spradly & McCurdy,

---

<sup>1</sup> The differences between responses for each sex were not substantial enough to warrant statistical testing for significance. Also, this is an exploratory study and not predictive or hypothesis-driven. However, these findings could lay the basis for such a study using statistical analysis in the future.

<sup>2</sup> It is very interesting that calling is viewed as much more impactful than texting and Facebook messages/wall posts. This specific finding could be worthy of further study.

2000, p. 72). Like the survey results, interview responses point toward the idea that there is not a strong difference between male and female satisfaction with technology. This is also very different than the Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, and Dill (2012) study that found a significant difference in female satisfaction.

The only couple that claimed that they were dissatisfied with the frequency of contact via technology was Georgia and Sean. Georgia stated, "...on days we can't see each other, it'd be nice to text more or something." Also, Sean said, "It'd be nice if we could text more." Although they were dissatisfied, both members of this couple had the same opinion: they wished they could text more. Once again, both the male and female of a couple held similar levels of satisfaction. This shows that there may not be a strong difference between how each sex in a romantic couple views communication technology in their relationships.

Like in the surveys, both the male and female members of each couple interviewed responded similarly when asked how they think their relationship would be affected if communication technologies were taken away from them indefinitely. For example, when asked this question, Carter responded, "I don't think it would distance us at all. I think it would make us be more proactive in our communication attempts." Similarly, Megan responded, "I actually think it would benefit the relationship." Megan and Carter both believed that removing technology would actually strengthen them as a couple. However, they both stated later that they would still never choose to remove technology from their relationship because they do depend on it so much. The three other couples also predicted similar outcomes if technology were taken away from them, showing that there is not a strong divide between how male and female romantic partners view technology in their relationships.

### **Discussion**

Overall, this research set out to uncover the effects of communication technologies on the romantic relationships of college students. To obtain a comprehensive perspective on this phenomenon, a mixed method approach using a survey and interviews was implemented. The study was designed to answer three questions: (1) Are individuals in these relationships dependent on communication technologies to maintain their relationships? (2) What role do communication technologies play in romantic relationship conflict? And (3) Do males and females hold different perceptions of communication technology in their romantic relationships?

Results from both research methods indicated that college students in romantic relationships depend on communication technologies to maintain normal and happy relationships. Students self-reported in the surveys that they believe their relationships would be harmed if key technologies such as texting and calling were no longer available to them. Also, in the interviews, students described at length how often they use these technologies, proving that they simply require them to function as a couple. Similarly, both survey and interviews revealed that communication technologies are an integral element in addressing conflict between romantic partners and are often the focus of conflict within the relationship. Finally, similar responses by male and female participants regarding satisfaction and the predicted outcome of removing technology from the relationship suggest that there is not a significant difference between how each sex values communication technologies in their relationships.

### **Social Implications**

I will now address the broader social and ethical implications of the above findings. Should young people change any of their technology habits in their relationships to become less dependent upon technology? Is conflict centered on technology necessarily a problem in

romantic relationships? Should we be concerned that young people do not know how to maintain a relationship without technology? To fully address these concerns in relation to the results from this study, it is important to understand how this study relates to the existing body of research on this topic.

First, Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together*, describes the paradox of people today, young and old, wanting to be with others in the same room, but also wanting to escape elsewhere with their cell phones in her 2012 TED Talk (Turkle, 2012). She explained that this paradox is derived from peoples' desire to, "...customize their lives...because the thing that matters most to them is control over where they put their attention" (Turkle, 2012). To Turkle, we must caution ourselves when we reach for our cell phones in order to, "...develop a more self-aware relationship with them, with each other, and with ourselves" (Turkle, 2012).

However, other studies have found that technology may not be as influential in our interpersonal relationships as Turkle describes. A 2010 study by researchers Jin and Peña focused on how communication technology relates to the attachment styles, relational uncertainty, and love commitment of college students in romantic relationships. Through surveying these students, they found that, "Overall, more mobile calls in romantic relationships are associated with positive relationship qualities" (Jin & Peña, 2010). Additional studies have revealed rather ambiguous results about the effects of these technologies on relationships. For example, a 2011 study by researchers at Brigham Young University, with a similar set of research questions as the present study, found that technology, "...can have both a positive and negative effect on relationships depending on the intent" (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011).



In only examining these three studies in relation to the present study, two ideas remain constant: communication technologies are affecting interpersonal relationships and we are still figuring out what to do with this knowledge.

However, these two ideas regarding the adoption of new technology are not new. In fact, they are simply a part of the technology adoption cycle that societies have always gone through. In more recent history, the adoption of the telephone may be used to exemplify this cycle. Upon its inception in the 1870s, the telephone was thought to be a mode of connecting to an “ethereal” world-- a place where those on earth could communicate with the dead (Marvin, 1988). As it grew in popularity, families began worrying about its effects on courtship and community norms. Marvin writes, “Women were considered especially susceptible to male manipulators of electrical technology because of their less-worldly experience in gauging trustworthiness” (Marvin, 1988). However, these fears abated after people became more familiar and comfortable with the telephone. This pattern can be seen in the adoption of every technology since the telephone: the television, the mobile phone, the internet, social networking sites, and now smart phones. It is important that we are able to recognize this pattern as it is happening when new technologies are created. This does not mean that we should ignore our fears and simply accept the ways new technologies may affect our way of life, but we should understand that this cycle will never stop. We must grow with the coming changes with caution, but not total aversion.

### **Professional Applications**

Specific groups of professionals will benefit from understanding the findings of this study by learning how to help themselves and others grow with technology. First, couple therapists and counselors would benefit from understanding the positive and negative effects specific technologies can have on certain areas of romantic relationships, explicitly dependency and

conflict. Second, communication and media scholars and college faculty could use this information to update or create new media literacy courses. Finally, technology industry innovators and marketers could use this research to create new technologies that better fit the needs of romantic couples. Although the technology discussed in this study may quickly become outdated, it will always remain a snapshot in time that can be used in comparison with other cycles of technology. This will allow us to better understand the effects of technology on our lives over time in order to proactively grow with the inevitable change.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several ways research like this could be improved in the future. First, I would recommend gathering a larger sample of both survey and interview participants, ideally from different colleges and from different demographic backgrounds. This study's sample was taken from a very limited, homogenous pool and likely only reflects the relationship patterns of college students in the Midwest. A larger, more diverse pool would help in being able to draw larger generalizations about college students. Second, future researchers could create even more survey and interview questions on specific topics, such as dependency and conflict, to obtain more in-depth information on these complex relationship features to draw more accurate conclusions. The current study asked questions about every area of the relationship being affected by technology, and could have obtained more insightful data from more focused questions.

### **Conclusion**

The constant pull of communication technologies on our attention and time calls for increased research as to how these technologies affect our abilities to interact with one another. Specifically, previous research lacks targeted depth on the subject of how the romantic relationships of college students are affected by these technologies. The aim of this study was to

analyze how this population uses communication technologies and what affect they are having on relationships. A mixed method approach of a survey and interviews was implemented to obtain a rich and detailed set of data. Three key research questions were created. It was asked if and to what extent these romantic couples depend on communication technologies to maintain successful relationships. It was concluded that college students depend on communication technologies, particularly texting and calling, to maintain normal and happy romantic relationships. It was also asked what role these technologies play in the conflict within these romantic relationships. Results show that communication technologies play a significant role in both addressing conflict as well as creating conflict within the relationship. Lastly, it was asked if there is a significant difference in how members of each sex perceive communication technologies in their romantic relationships. Results suggest that there is not a significant difference in how males and females view these technologies in their relationships.

These findings add to the existing body of research on the effects of technology on interpersonal relationships. It may also be used in personal and professional settings in order to help people better understand how the technologies they use fit in to the ever-changing technoscape of history.

## References

- Burke, S. C., Wallen, M., Vail-Smith, K., & Knox, D. (2011). Using technology to control intimate partners: An exploratory study of college undergraduates. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(3), 1162-1167.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezp3.lib.umn.edu/10.1016/j.chb.2010.12.010>
- Campbell, R., & Martin, C. R. (2013). *Media & culture: an introduction to mass communication* (8th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martins.
- Connell, J. H. (2011). College students' individual internet and technology use and communication technology use with parents. Thesis (M.A.) --University of Minnesota, 2011. Major: Family social science).
- Coyne, S. M., Stockdale, L., Busby, D., Iverson, B., & Grant, D. M. (2011). I Luv U :)!: A Descriptive Study Of The Media Use Of Individuals In Romantic Relationships. *Family Relations*, 60(2), 150-162.
- Crystal, D., & Crystal, D. (2008). Texting. *ELT Journal*, 62(1), 77-83.
- Green, N., (2002). On the move: Technology, mobility, and the mediation of social time and space. *The Information Society*, 18(4), 281-292. doi: 10.1080/01972240290075129
- Hultgren, K. A. (2013). *Romantic relationships in the digital age: exploring technology's impact on relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution* (Undergraduate honors thesis). Retrieved from UA Campus Repository database. (UMI No. 10150/297651).
- Jin, B., & Peña, J. F. (2010). Mobile Communication in Romantic Relationships: Mobile Phone Use, Relational Uncertainty, Love, Commitment, and Attachment Styles. *Communication Reports*, 23(1), 39-51.

- Kimbrough, A. M. 1., amkimbrough1@crimson.ua.edu, Guadagno, R. E. 2., Muscanell, N. L. 3., & Dill, J. (2013). Gender differences in mediated communication: Women connect more than do men. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(3), 896-900.  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2012.12.005
- Licoppe, C. (2004). 'Connected' presence: the emergence of a new repertoire for managing social relationships in a changing communication technoscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22(1), 135-156.
- Marvin, C. (1988). *When old technologies were new: thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pettigrew, J. (2009). Text messaging and connectedness within close interpersonal relationships. *Marriage & Family Review*, 45(6-8), 697-716. doi: 10.1080/01494920903224269
- Simpson, J. (2002). Computer-mediated communication. *ELT Journal: English Language Teachers Journal*, 56(4), 414-415. doi:10.1093/elt/56.4.414
- Tannen, D. (1994). Conversation Style: Talking on the Job. In J. Spradely & D. W. McCurdy (2000) (Eds.), *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* (70-78). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Turkle, S. (2012, February). Sherry Turkle: Connected, but alone? [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_alone\\_together](http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together).
- Utz, S., & Beukeboom, C. (2011). The Role of Social Network Sites in Romantic Relationships: Effects on Jealousy and Relationship Happiness. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 16(4). Retrieved October 30, 2013, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2011.01552.x>